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iNaturalist partnering with Google genAI is selling out to big tech so they can greenwash their product

ai

This is the first time MeltedMottle has posted — let's welcome them to our community!

MeltedMottle 1h

I took a deep dive into the iNaturalist threads on gen ai and I have some thoughts. I get why many people are so alarmed: this is screaming red flag for this company and the associated naturalist community.

Google is one of the most ecologically destructive companies on the planet. What they are trying to do here is classic greenwashing. This is no different than iNaturalist partnering with BP or Wikipedia partnering with Google. It defeats the purpose of the entire enterprise, by undermining all credibility as a public-service-driven organization. It was built by volunteers, not computer scientists, and they seem to be forgetting that. Big Tech's business model is to trap the market by offering unsustainable discounts or 'free money'. Who better to greenwash their destructive tech than an ecological research community. Importantly, other critics bring up the reputation hit that this should result in.

Partnering with Google should be a death blow to the integrity of this mission. The way they claim to operate, their cultural mantra, is as a public good. This community was created by volunteers with a commitment to conservation. You don't get to have it both ways: either you are a tech company with no morals or a scientific-conservation resource, with morals. Based on reading other critiques and iNaturalist's responses (or lack thereof) to them, I think the area where they really show their weakness and lack of forethought is the supposed numbers they cite

lack of forethought is the supposed numbers they cite on energy usage.

They clearly are hiding something here. First, those energy numbers are straight propaganda from Google's PR group. Accurate numbers don't exist because Google is intentionally lying about their energy use. More importantly though, is that its not about the energy use of a single LLM retrieval: you are buying into the training model, that was built by crawling the entire internet from stolen data, with exponential energy expenditures. These custom models do not exist in a silo. That means that you are supporting the entire ecologically destructive nonsense-generator.

The lack of honesty from iNaturalist in their forum responses is extremely alarming. It reads like they have already cashed a check from Google and that they are just putting on a performative show of openness. I'm someone who teaches plant identification for a living and at this point I would not recommend someone join a community that so blatantly disregards the principles of environmentalism. I hope they start taking these criticisms from many of their community members more seriously.

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schizoform 21m

I haven't fully processed your argument, which may have merits I've missed. How do you suggest iNat should behave differently, and what are the tradeoffs?

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spookyaranhas 15m

You said it better than I could have. Kudos.

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mataan 3m

100% agree, well said

Unlisted 3 mins ago

joedziewa 2m

If it's a no-strings donation, I'd say fantastic, unless it was coming from the *former* "don't be evil" people.

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